

Captain Rogers

W. W. Jacobs

A man came slowly over the old stone bridge, and averting his gaze from the dark river with its silent craft, looked with some satisfaction toward the feeble lights of the small town on the other side. He walked with the painful, forced step of one who has already trudged far. His worsted hose, where they were not darned, were in holes, and his coat and knee-breeches were rusty with much wear, but he straightened himself as he reached the end of the bridge and stepped out bravely to the taverns which stood in a row facing the quay.

He passed the “Queen Anne”—a mere beershop—without pausing, and after a glance apiece at the “Royal George” and the “Trusty Anchor,” kept on his way to where the “Golden Key” hung out a gilded emblem. It was the best house in Riverstone, and patronized by the gentry, but he adjusted his faded coat, and with a swaggering air entered and walked boldly into the coffee-room.

The room was empty, but a bright fire afforded a pleasant change to the chill October air outside. He drew up a chair, and placing his feet on the fender, exposed his tattered soles to the blaze, as a waiter who had just seen him enter the room came and stood aggressively inside the door.

“Brandy and water,” said the stranger; “hot.”

“The coffee-room is for gentlemen staying in the house,” said the waiter.

The stranger took his feet from the fender, and rising slowly, walked toward him. He was a short man and thin, but there was something so menacing in his attitude, and something so fearsome in his stony brown eyes, that the other, despite his disgust for ill-dressed people, moved back uneasily.

“Brandy and water, hot,” repeated the stranger; “and plenty of it. D’ye hear?”

The man turned slowly to depart.

“Stop!” said the other, imperiously. “What’s the name of the landlord here?”

“Mullet,” said the fellow, sulkily.

“Send him to me,” said the other, resuming his seat; “and hark you, my friend, more civility, or ’twill be the worse for you.”

He stirred the log on the fire with his foot until a shower of sparks whirled up the chimney. The door opened, and the landlord, with the waiter behind him, entered the room, but he still gazed placidly at the glowing embers.

“What do you want?” demanded the landlord, in a deep voice.

The stranger turned a little weazened yellow face and grinned at him familiarly.

“Send that fat rascal of yours away,” he said, slowly.

The landlord started at his voice and eyed him closely; then he signed to the man to withdraw, and closing the door behind him, stood silently watching his visitor.

“You didn’t expect to see me, Rogers,” said the latter.

“My name’s Mullet,” said the other, sternly. “What do you want?”

“Oh, Mullet?” said the other, in surprise. “I’m afraid I’ve made a mistake, then. I thought you were my old shipmate, Captain Rogers. It’s a foolish mistake of mine, as I’ve no doubt Rogers was hanged years ago. You never had a brother named Rogers, did you?”

“I say again, what do you want?” demanded the other, advancing upon him.

“Since you’re so good,” said the other. “I want new clothes, food, and lodging of the best, and my pockets filled with money.”

“You had better go and look for all those things, then,” said Mullet. “You won’t find them here.”

“Ay!” said the other, rising. “Well, well—There was a hundred guineas on the head of my old shipmate Rogers some fifteen years ago. I’ll see whether it has been earned yet.”

“If I gave you a hundred guineas,” said the innkeeper, repressing his passion by a mighty effort, “you would not be satisfied.”

“Reads like a book,” said the stranger, in tones of pretended delight. “What a man it is!”

He fell back as he spoke, and thrusting his hand into his pocket, drew forth a long pistol as the innkeeper, a man of huge frame, edged toward him.

“Keep your distance,” he said, in a sharp, quick voice.

The innkeeper, in no wise disturbed at the pistol, turned away calmly, and ringing the bell, ordered some spirits. Then taking a chair, he motioned to the other to do the same, and they sat in silence until the staring waiter had left the room again. The stranger raised his glass.

“My old friend Captain Rogers,” he said, solemnly, “and may he never get his deserts!”

“From what jail have you come?” inquired Mullet, sternly.

“Pon my soul,” said the other, “I have been in so many—looking for Captain Rogers—that I almost forget the last, but I have just tramped from London, two hundred and eighty odd miles, for the pleasure of seeing your damned ugly figure-head again; and now I’ve found it, I’m going to stay. Give me some money.”

The innkeeper, without a word, drew a little gold and silver from his pocket, and placing it on the table, pushed it toward him.

“Enough to go on with,” said the other, pocketing it; “in future it is halves. D’ye hear me? Halves! And I’ll stay here and see I get it.”

He sat back in his chair, and meeting the other’s hatred with a gaze as steady as his own, replaced his pistol.

“A nice snug harbor after our many voyages,” he continued. “Shipmates we were, shipmates we’ll be; while Nick Gunn is alive you shall never want for company. Lord! Do you remember the Dutch brig, and the fat frightened mate?”

“I have forgotten it,” said the other, still eyeing him steadfastly. “I have forgotten many things. For fifteen years I have lived a decent, honest life. Pray God for your own sinful soul, that the devil in me does not wake again.”

“Fifteen years is a long nap,” said Gunn, carelessly; “what a godsend it ’ll be for you to have me by you to remind you of old times! Why, you’re looking smug, man; the honest innkeeper to the life! Gad! who’s the girl?”

He rose and made a clumsy bow as a girl of eighteen, after a moment’s hesitation at the door, crossed over to the innkeeper.

“I’m busy, my dear,” said the latter, somewhat sternly.

“Our business,” said Gunn, with another bow, “is finished. Is this your daughter, Rog—Mullet?”

“My stepdaughter,” was the reply.

Gunn placed a hand, which lacked two fingers, on his breast, and bowed again.

“One of your father’s oldest friends,” he said smoothly; “and fallen on evil days; I’m sure your gentle heart will be pleased to hear that your good father has requested me—for a time—to make his house my home.”

“Any friend of my father’s is welcome to me, sir,” said the girl, coldly. She looked from the innkeeper to his odd-looking guest, and conscious of something strained in the air, gave him a little bow and quitted the room.

“You insist upon staying, then?” said Mullet, after a pause.

“More than ever,” replied Gunn, with a leer toward the door. “Why, you don’t think I’m *afraid*, Captain? You should know me better than that.”

“Life is sweet,” said the other.

“Ay,” assented Gunn, “so sweet that you will share things with me to keep it.”

“No,” said the other, with great calm. “I am man enough to have a better reason.”

“No psalm singing,” said Gunn, coarsely. “And look cheerful, you old buccaneer. Look as a man should look who has just met an old friend never to lose him again.”

He eyed his man expectantly and put his hand to his pocket again, but the innkeeper’s face was troubled, and he gazed stolidly at the fire.

“See what fifteen years’ honest, decent life does for us,” grinned the intruder.

The other made no reply, but rising slowly, walked to the door without a word.

“Landlord,” cried Gunn, bringing his maimed hand sharply down on the table.

The innkeeper turned and regarded him.

“Send me in some supper,” said Gunn; “the best you have, and plenty of it, and have a room prepared. The best.”

The door closed silently, and was opened a little later by the dubious George coming in to

set a bountiful repast. Gunn, after cursing him for his slowness and awkwardness, drew his chair to the table and made the meal of one seldom able to satisfy his hunger. He finished at last, and after sitting for some time smoking, with his legs sprawled on the fender, rang for a candle and demanded to be shown to his room.

His proceedings when he entered it were but a poor compliment to his host. Not until he had poked and pried into every corner did he close the door. Then, not content with locking it, he tilted a chair beneath the handle, and placing his pistol beneath his pillow, fell fast asleep.

Despite his fatigue he was early astir next morning. Breakfast was laid for him in the coffee-room, and his brow darkened. He walked into the hall, and after trying various doors entered a small sitting-room, where his host and daughter sat at breakfast, and with an easy assurance drew a chair to the table. The innkeeper helped him without a word, but the girl's hand shook under his gaze as she passed him some coffee.

"As soft a bed as ever I slept in," he remarked.

"I hope that you slept well," said the girl, civilly.

"Like a child," said Gunn, gravely; "an easy conscience. Eh, Mullet?"

The innkeeper nodded and went on eating. The other, after another remark or two, followed his example, glancing occasionally with warm approval at the beauty of the girl who sat at the head of the table.

"A sweet girl," he remarked, as she withdrew at the end of the meal; "and no mother, I presume?"

"No mother," repeated the other.

Gunn sighed and shook his head.

"A sad case, truly," he murmured. "No mother and such a guardian. Poor soul, if she but knew! Well, we must find her a husband."

He looked down as he spoke, and catching sight of his rusty clothes and broken shoes, clapped his hand to his pocket; and with a glance at his host, sallied out to renew his wardrobe. The innkeeper, with an inscrutable face, watched him down the quay, then with bent head he returned to the house and fell to work on his accounts.

In this work Gunn, returning an hour later, clad from head to foot in new apparel, offered to

assist him. Mullett hesitated, but made no demur; neither did he join in the ecstasies which his new partner displayed at the sight of the profits. Gunn put some more gold into his new pockets, and throwing himself back in a chair, called loudly to George to bring him some drink.

In less than a month the intruder was the virtual master of the “Golden Key.” Resistance on the part of the legitimate owner became more and more feeble, the slightest objection on his part drawing from the truculent Gunn dark allusions to his past and threats against his future, which for the sake of his daughter he could not ignore. His health began to fail, and Joan watched with perplexed terror the growth of a situation which was in a fair way of becoming unbearable.

The arrogance of Gunn knew no bounds. The maids learned to tremble at his polite grin, or his worse freedom, and the men shrank appalled from his profane wrath. George, after ten years’ service, was brutally dismissed, and refusing to accept dismissal from his hands, appealed to his master. The innkeeper confirmed it, and with lack-lustre eyes fenced feebly when his daughter, regardless of Gunn’s presence, indignantly appealed to him.

“The man was rude to my friend, my dear,” he said dispiritedly

“If he was rude, it was because Mr. Gunn deserved it,” said Joan, hotly.

Gunn laughed uproariously.

“Gad, my dear, I like you!” he cried, slapping his leg. “You’re a girl of spirit. Now I will make you a fair offer. If you ask for George to stay, stay he shall, as a favour to your sweet self.”

The girl trembled.

“Who is master here?” she demanded, turning a full eye on her father.

Mullett laughed uneasily.

“This is business,” he said, trying to speak lightly, “and women can’t understand it. Gunn is —is valuable to me, and George must go.”

“Unless you plead for him, sweet one?” said Gunn.

The girl looked at her father again, but he turned his head away and tapped on the floor with his foot. Then in perplexity, akin to tears, she walked from the room, carefully drawing her dress aside as Gunn held the door for her.

“A fine girl,” said Gunn, his thin lips working; “a fine spirit. ’Twill be pleasant to break it; but she does not know who is master here.”

“She is young yet,” said the other, hurriedly.

“I will soon age her if she looks like that at me again,” said Gunn. “By —, I’ll turn out the whole crew into the street, and her with them, an’ I wish it. I’ll lie in my bed warm o’ nights and think of her huddled on a doorstep.”

His voice rose and his fists clenched, but he kept his distance and watched the other warily. The innkeeper’s face was contorted and his brow grew wet. For one moment something peeped out of his eyes; the next he sat down in his chair again and nervously fingered his chin.

“I have but to speak,” said Gunn, regarding him with much satisfaction, “and you will hang, and your money go to the Crown. What will become of her then, think you?”

The other laughed nervously.

“’Twould be stopping the golden eggs,” he ventured.

“Don’t think too much of that,” said Gunn, in a hard voice. “I was never one to be baulked, as you know.”

“Come, come. Let us be friends,” said Mullet; “the girl is young, and has had her way.”

He looked almost pleadingly at the other, and his voice trembled. Gunn drew himself up, and regarding him with a satisfied sneer, quitted the room without a word.

Affairs at the “Golden Key” grew steadily worse and worse. Gunn dominated the place, and his vile personality hung over it like a shadow. Appeals to the innkeeper were in vain; his health was breaking fast, and he moodily declined to interfere. Gunn appointed servants of his own choosing—brazen maids and foul-mouthed men. The old patrons ceased to frequent the “Golden Key,” and its bedrooms stood empty. The maids scarcely deigned to take an order from Joan, and the men spoke to her familiarly. In the midst of all this the innkeeper, who had complained once or twice of vertigo, was seized with a fit.

Joan, flying to him for protection against the brutal advances of Gunn, found him lying in a heap behind the door of his small office, and in her fear called loudly for assistance. A little knot of servants collected, and stood regarding him stupidly. One made a brutal jest. Gunn, pressing through the throng, turned the senseless body over with his foot, and cursing vilely, ordered them to carry it upstairs.

Until the surgeon came, Joan, kneeling by the bed, held on to the senseless hand as her only protection against the evil faces of Gunn and his proteges. Gunn himself was taken aback, the innkeeper's death at that time by no means suiting his aims.

The surgeon was a man of few words and fewer attainments, but under his ministrations the innkeeper, after a long interval, rallied. The half-closed eyes opened, and he looked in a dazed fashion at his surroundings. Gunn drove the servants away and questioned the man of medicine. The answers were vague and interspersed with Latin. Freedom from noise and troubles of all kinds was insisted upon and Joan was installed as nurse, with a promise of speedy assistance.

The assistance arrived late in the day in the shape of an elderly woman, whose Spartan treatment of her patients had helped many along the silent road. She commenced her reign by punching the sick man's pillows, and having shaken him into consciousness by this means, gave him a dose of physic, after first tasting it herself from the bottle.

After the first rally the innkeeper began to fail slowly. It was seldom that he understood what was said to him, and pitiful to the beholder to see in his intervals of consciousness his timid anxiety to earn the good-will of the all-powerful Gunn. His strength declined until assistance was needed to turn him in the bed, and his great sinewy hands were forever trembling and fidgeting on the coverlet.

Joan, pale with grief and fear, tended him assiduously. Her stepfather's strength had been a proverb in the town, and many a hasty citizen had felt the strength of his arm. The increasing lawlessness of the house filled her with dismay, and the coarse attentions of Gunn became more persistent than ever. She took her meals in the sick-room, and divided her time between that and her own.

Gunn himself was in a dilemma. With Mullet dead, his power was at an end and his visions of wealth dissipated. He resolved to feather his nest immediately, and interviewed the surgeon. The surgeon was ominously reticent, the nurse cheerfully ghoulish.

"Four days I give him," she said, calmly; "four blessed days, not but what he might slip away at any moment."

Gunn let one day of the four pass, and then, choosing a time when Joan was from the room, entered it for a little quiet conversation. The innkeeper's eyes were open, and, what was more to the purpose, intelligent.

"You're cheating the hangman, after all," snarled Gunn. "I'm off to swear an information."

The other, by a great effort, turned his heavy head and fixed his wistful eyes on him.

“Mercy!” he whispered. “For her sake—give me—a little time!”

“To slip your cable, I suppose,” quoth Gunn. “Where’s your money? Where’s your hoard, you miser?”

Mullet closed his eyes. He opened them again slowly and strove to think, while Gunn watched him narrowly. When he spoke, his utterance was thick and labored.

“Come to-night,” he muttered, slowly. “Give me—time—I will make your —your fortune. But the nurse-watches.”

“I’ll see to her,” said Gunn, with a grin. “But tell me now, lest you die first.”

“You will—let Joan—have a share?” panted the innkeeper.

“Yes, yes,” said Gunn, hastily.

The innkeeper strove to raise himself in the bed, and then fell back again exhausted as Joan’s step was heard on the stairs. Gunn gave a savage glance of warning at him, and barring the progress of the girl at the door, attempted to salute her. Joan came in pale and trembling, and falling on her knees by the bedside, took her father’s hand in hers and wept over it. The innkeeper gave a faint groan and a shiver ran through his body.

It was nearly an hour after midnight that Nick Gunn, kicking off his shoes, went stealthily out onto the landing. A little light came from the partly open door of the sick-room, but all else was in blackness. He moved along and peered in.

The nurse was sitting in a high-backed oak chair by the fire. She had slipped down in the seat, and her untidy head hung on her bosom. A glass stood on the small oak table by her side, and a solitary candle on the high mantel-piece diffused a sickly light. Gunn entered the room, and finding that the sick man was dozing, shook him roughly.

The innkeeper opened his eyes and gazed at him blankly.

“Wake, you fool,” said Gunn, shaking him again.

The other roused and muttered something incoherently. Then he stirred slightly.

“The nurse,” he whispered.

“She’s safe now,” said Gunn. “I’ve seen to that.”

He crossed the room lightly, and standing before the unconscious woman, inspected her closely and raised her in the chair. Her head fell limply over the arm.

“Dead?” inquired Mullet, in a fearful whisper.

“Drugged,” said Gunn, shortly. “Now speak up, and be lively.”

The innkeeper’s eyes again travelled in the direction of the nurse.

“The men,” he whispered; “the servants.”

“Dead drunk and asleep,” said Gunn, biting the words. “The last day would hardly rouse them. Now will you speak, damn you!”

“I must—take care—of Joan,” said the father.

Gunn shook his clenched hand at him.

“My money—is—is—” said the other. “Promise me on—your oath—Joan.”

“Ay, ay,” growled Gunn; “how many more times? I’ll marry her, and she shall have what I choose to give her. Speak up, you fool! It’s not for you to make terms. Where is it?”

He bent over, but Mullet, exhausted with his efforts, had closed his eyes again, and half turned his head.

“Where is it, damn you?” said Gunn, from between his teeth.

Mullet opened his eyes again, glanced fearfully round the room, and whispered. Gunn, with a stifled oath, bent his ear almost to his mouth, and the next moment his neck was in the grip of the strongest man in Riverstone, and an arm like a bar of iron over his back pinned him down across the bed.

“You dog!” hissed a fierce voice in his ear. “I’ve got you—Captain Rogers at your service, and now you may tell his name to all you can. Shout it, you spawn of hell. Shout it!”

He rose in bed, and with a sudden movement flung the other over on his back. Gunn’s eyes were starting from his head, and he writhed convulsively.

“I thought you were a sharper man, Gunn,” said Rogers, still in the same hot whisper, as he

relaxed his grip a little; “you are too simple, you hound! When you first threatened me I resolved to kill you. Then you threatened my daughter. I wish that you had nine lives, that I might take them all. Keep still!”

He gave a half-glance over his shoulder at the silent figure of the nurse, and put his weight on the twisting figure on the bed.

“You drugged the hag, good Gunn,” he continued. “To-morrow morning, Gunn, they will find you in your room dead, and if one of the scum you brought into my house be charged with the murder, so much the better. When I am well they will go. I am already feeling a little bit stronger, Gunn, as you see, and in a month I hope to be about again.”

He averted his face, and for a time gazed sternly and watchfully at the door. Then he rose slowly to his feet, and taking the dead man in his arms, bore him slowly and carefully to his room, and laid him a huddled heap on the floor. Swiftly and noiselessly he put the dead man’s shoes on and turned his pockets inside out, kicked a rug out of place, and put a guinea on the floor. Then he stole cautiously down stairs and set a small door at the back open. A dog barked frantically, and he hurried back to his room. The nurse still slumbered by the fire.

She awoke in the morning shivering with the cold, and being jealous of her reputation, rekindled the fire, and measuring out the dose which the invalid should have taken, threw it away. On these unconscious preparations for an alibi Captain Rogers gazed through half-closed lids, and then turning his grim face to the wall, waited for the inevitable alarm.

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